Doors Closed Doors Open

“The only thing that is constant is change” is a famous quote by the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Indeed, life is constantly changing and evolving. This means that from time to time, things just stop existing. Losing a job, ending a marriage or moving to another place are examples of changes that many people have experienced. We lose out on something important, a big plan collapses, or we are rejected by someone. Another way of expressing this feeling of loss is that a door is being closed. However, the end of one thing is always the beginning of something new. We have the option to stay focused on what is not here anymore (the doors that have been closed), or become aware of the new avenues that unfold. Optimism is about the latter option. It is about also seeing the doors that are being opened. It is about holding a favourable view about the future, taking closing doors into consideration and turning them into something beneficial.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is twofold. First, the exercise can make clients aware that the end of something is also the beginning of something new. The end of something positive is not only negative, but can also create room for something positive again. The exercise can help clients to become aware that this requires a shift in perspective from focusing on what is not there anymore, to seeing the potential of the future. Second, the exercise can help clients to become aware of what currently prevents them from adopting a more optimistic outlook when doors close. This insight can be used to develop a more positive outlook for future “closing door events”.

Advice

Talking about important things that no longer exist can be an emotional exercise for clients. Make sure to acknowledge the pain and the difficulty that they experience(d) because of the loss. If a practitioner moves on too fast to the positive side of a closing door, the client may feel misunderstood. Explain that the goal of the exercise is not to downplay the negative event, but to create awareness of the positive potential that arises as a result from the closed door.

Suggested Readings

Tool Description

Instructions

Think about a time in your life where someone rejected you or you missed out on something important or when a big plan collapsed. These would be points in your life where a door closed. Now think about what happened after: what doors opened after? What would have never happened if the first door didn't close? Write down these experiences in the spaces below (write as many experiences as possible that come to mind).

The door that closed on me was:

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The new door that opened for me was:

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Now, reflect upon your experiences and respond to the following questions:

• What led to the door closing? What helped you open the new door?
• How long did it take you to realize that a new door was open?
• Was it easy or hard for you to realize that a new door was open?
• What prevented you from seeing the new open door?
• What can you do next time to recognize the new opportunity sooner?
• What were the effects of the door closing on you? Did it last long?
• Did the experience bring anything positive?
• Which character strengths did you use in this exercise?
• What does a closed door represent to you now?
• What did you learn from the door closing?
• Is there more room for growth from these types of experiences?
• Is there a closed door that you still wish to see open?
Benefit Finding

Helgeson and colleagues (2006) define benefit finding as “the positive effects that result from a traumatic event” (p. 797). It is the process of deriving positive growth from adversity and has become a central construct in the evolution of positive psychology. Clients can report major positive changes as a result of challenging life events such as severe illness or trauma.

In general, research has revealed positive long-term effects of benefit finding. For instance, some individuals report a new appreciation of their own strength and resilience, an enhanced sense of purpose, greater spirituality, closer ties with others, and changes in life priorities. Others feel that their relationships are stronger and that they have become more compassionate or altruistic (e.g., Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Davis et al., 1998; McMillen et al., 1997).

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to create awareness of the possible benefits of challenging life events. This explicit focus on the positive characteristics of negative life events can help to boost resilience.

Advice

In this exercise, the participant will be asked to recall a traumatic life event. Be extra attentive of the participant during the exercise. For most clients thinking of a difficult event will trigger negative thoughts and/or feelings.

- Make sure to acknowledge the painful experience. If the practitioner proceeds to the positive aspects of the event too early, the client may feel that he/she is not being understood or that the severity of the event is being underestimated. Consequently, the willingness to look at the event from another perspective is likely to be reduced.
- Considering life events from different viewpoints can be seen as a way to reduce dichotomous (black and white) thinking. The aim of this exercise is to create a balanced perspective on negative life events, rather than to stimulate positive thinking. Even when positive thinking is used to avoid negative feelings that accompany the traumatic life event, it can be considered as a form of experiential avoidance, and should be discouraged. It is important to inform clients about this distinction.
Tool Description

Instructions

1. Have the client talk about a traumatic event (e.g. loss, severe physical injury, etc.) in as much detail as possible for a few minutes. Have the client try to freely express any and all emotions and thoughts they have about the experience.

2. Now have the client focus on the positive aspects of the experience. Below are some questions to help guide the client:
   - How has the experience changed you?
   - What has the experience taught you?
   - How has the experience made you better equipped to meet similar challenges in the future?
   - How do you feel that this experience has made you grow as a person?